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## CONDITIONS WITHIN ROUMANIA AND TURKEY

*By Melvin M. Knight, Ph.D., Member of Roumanian Red Cross Commission*

All the nations in the Balkans, excepting Greece, are in bad condition financially—and rather uncertain as to just what their condition is. Turkey is probably the worst off. Silver money is worth exactly its value by weight; and it takes 70 piasters in paper to be worth 20 in silver. Enver Pasha and a small group of satellites, “Young Turks” (usually meaning not Turk at all) most of them, have disappeared with the national treasure. Thus there is practically no bullion basis at all for the currency. Turkey was held out of bankruptcy, before the war, only by the conflicting claims of different nations. The largest creditors, as you know, were England, Germany and France. Even if the Greeks, or some group of powers, should be given a nominal political protectorate over European Turkey and the Straits, there is little doubt as to who would be the real beneficiary of the inevitable foreclosure.

Turkish army discipline is likely to be a little shocking to the sensibilities of the Occidental, until he has become more or less familiar with the customs of southeast Europe in general in this particular. Some soldiers, the overflow from barracks, were quartered in one of the long outside corridors of the Mosque of St. Sophia during my recent visit. One morning I was present while the bastinado was being administered to some culprits. One of the waiting list on a little platform at the side would be ordered down. He would lie on his back, with his shoes removed. Another soldier would grasp his legs just below the knees and hold his feet, bottoms upward, about 3 feet from the floor. The officer would then take a stout stick, about twice the thickness of a man's thumb

and 2 or  $2\frac{1}{2}$  feet long, and strike the sole of the foot at intervals of several seconds. This officer strained his muscles; there was a vicious crack about the impact which made one wince, and wonder if the bones would not be broken. One man had eleven strokes, but his stoicism broke down after the seventh, and he cried out at every blow. At the close of the performance, the officer gave a sharp order, and the man had to jump erect on his recently pulped feet and stand at salute. One man did not whimper at all. While he was standing at attention, the officer struck him a hard blow in the face with the flat of his hand. Whether this was because he had not cried out, or whether his was an uncommon breach of discipline, I do not know. Aside from any emotional distaste for such procedure, it raises the question as to the governing capacity of a race which after many hundreds of years must or can handle its subjects in just that way. In spite of all this, it is quite fashionable for those who have spent some time in the Ottoman Empire to vehemently hate the Greeks, Jews and Armenians, and to guard the Turks as the best racial type in the Balkans. The commercial shrewdness and general rascality of these three alien races is certainly beyond debate. There is a saying that it takes two Jews to beat a Greek, and two Greeks to beat an Armenian.

Personally, the difference between the Turkish discipline and the Roumanian is not apparent to me at a glance. Both in their present form are copied from the Prussian, and both "out-Prussia" it. A Roumanian Captain P. was wildly gesticulating in the face of an army chauffeur while he harangued him (or abused him, if you like), in approximately the key of "Q-flat." The soldier was not the ordinary dirty, cringing peasant type. For example, he spoke French with some fluency—an unusual accomplishment for a common soldier. After some minutes of high-keyed questions, the answers to which were not accepted or even allowed to be finished, the soldier would unconsciously break his rigid "attention" position, and use his hands more or less as he talked (Roumanian is a Latinic

language). The Captain would then thrust down the hands and slap him viciously a number of times in the face, accompanied by imprecations. At length, the officer made some threats in evidently highly idiomatic Roumanian, of which I could not even understand the gist, but which immediately reduced the soldier to a cowed and concerned silence. Then the Captain struck him a number of times for not responding with sufficient alacrity, as he had just struck him for beginning answers he was not allowed to finish. Later, I casually asked the officer what sort of punishments they were allowed to administer to soldiers. He seemed surprised at the idea suggested by the French word "permis." He said he might have this fellow thoroughly whipped or, significantly, "perhaps worse." Upset the caste system of such an army for a moment, and its pent-up-hates give you what has been termed "Bolshevism," a term we Westerners have a way of talking much about on a rather slender basis of understanding, perhaps.

If a permanent partition of the territories in this part of the world is now to be made, the one certainty is that the Bulgarians will not get all the territories chiefly inhabited by people of that nationality. The English secret service agents have been very actively trying to eliminate the intellectual disease now popularly called "Pro-Bulgarianism," but called by a very different name ten years ago by English writers. Many English and Americans who visit central Macedonia contract this disease, and must be segregated, as it is quite contagious.

Before the Great War, the Roumanians claimed to be a nation of some fourteen millions of people, if all their people could be given them. Of course, a number of people in any possible division would belong to other races, but it was considered legitimate to claim anything which had 55 per cent Roumanians, or even less, if the other races were numerous, so that there were more Roumanians than any other one nationality. Now, after the war and the typhus epidemics, it was surprising to find that the Roumanians have become a race of *nineteen* millions. Such regions as the Banat, which doubtless contains some Roumanians, are not sub-

ject to debate (by either side). This territory, for example, is *absolutely* necessary, we are assured, because it alone would establish a logical frontier, and because it contains valuable iron works.

I wish first to make a rough sketch of economic conditions here, and then to make a few remarks on the political situation. Some goods are now coming in and the prices of the lightest articles of a nature to be easily transported have been considerably modified. A good pair of shoes is still worth 400 or 500 lei (the lei is equivalent to a franc in normal times), and only a short time ago they were worth 1000. During the winter just closed, good second-hand overcoats sold as high as 2000 francs, and even higher. New ones were unobtainable. The prices of other clothes were pretty much in proportion. One must be rich to have proper clothing, in a climate similar to that of New York.

Food prices were quite as bad, and have not changed very much yet. Flour until American imports began to come in, was almost out of the market, entirely so for the poor. Tea, the great national mild drink, was 280 lei the kilo; sugar 50 lei, and corn meal from 6 or 7 to 15 depending upon the locality. People made huge fortunes out of these things, speculating on the necessities of the starving. Of course, the government passed regulations. But if you pass a law that sugar can sell for no more than 11 or 12 francs the kilo, the big dealer, a friend of some minister or other, will sell at the fixed price to a number of his friends, collecting large "tips" for the privilege of buying so cheaply. When the article finally gets to the poor consumer, it is 35 or 40 lei after all.

The government controls all the transportation, means for which are very scarce. Of 1400 locomotives before the war, only a little over 100 are now in condition to run, and many of these are very poor. The Germans are roundly cursed for this situation, in order to keep the poor quiet, while the friends of the Government wax fabulously rich on the monopoly thereby created. The members of the Government grant permits to transport

only to their "friends" who either use the permits to haul things from where they are cheap to where they are high priced, or sell the precious permissions outright to speculators. The result is fortunes for the government's friends, plenty to eat and wear for those able to pay, and the most wretched want for the nation at large.

A few ordinary grafters have been skimming the cream off the market. Thread sold until a week or two ago at \$2 and \$3 per spool. Every Roumanian ship which docked carried one or two people, officers, couriers, etc., who managed to slip enough of such articles to make a few thousands of francs profit. The French rushed "relief" to the Roumanians—doubtless in response to the call of their Commercial Bureau here. This relief took the form of perfumes and silk stockings (!) which were sold to the rich at prices the writer fears to report, as he certainly would not be believed. The papers now tell us that the French are going to open a similar "Commercial Bureau" in Bulgaria, to let French traders know where the largest profits are to be made. So far, the Americans seem to be the only people with any idea at all of relief proper—regardless of the money to be made. And even at this, the French are openly hostile to us—for spoiling the market for the French profiteers on wartime starvation conditions. If we had never done anything for France along the same lines, the breath of their ingratitude would not be so keen.

There is a real dearth of materials in Roumania, and the Food Commission, distinctly an American institution in all its functions, is doing a wonderful piece of work. Only this morning, I met a Lieutenant Commander who had just docked three American flour ships at Constanza, bearing 24,000 tons of that precious material. But there is no doubt, in spite of all the energy and efficiency of the American officers, that a great deal of speculation in American flour is going on. Moreover, there are some supplies in the country, at reasonable prices, but only the friends of officials can get permission to transport them to the cities—at several hundred per cent profit.

The trouble is, in a nutshell, that the whole fabric of control is rotten from top to bottom, and from center to circumference. "Blacksheesh" the Turkish expression for anything from a tip to a sure enough bribe, is everywhere current; and there is no dearth of what in English we call plain thieving. The Mayor of B., a Roumanian port town, asked the commanding officer of a British war vessel for 100 tons of coal to enable him to open the schools. It was granted at once. The schools did not open, however, and an investigation showed that the coal had been sold on the market to a speculator. The mayor of another port town made a similar request. Warned by the experience of his colleague, this Britisher immediately assented, but stated that he would deliver the coal at the school buildings in small installments, as needed. That was the last he heard of it—there was no lump graft to be made in that way!

The former American Red Cross Commission to Roumania distributed only a part of its supplies before leaving. The remainder were left for the Roumanian Red Cross, but under the special charge of a Russian Colonel V—as thorough a scoundrel as ever walked upright. He was copiously decorated for the magnificent way in which he gave away these supplies—to his friends and to such Roumanian dignitaries as had to be hushed up. Some American army officers tried to get hold of about a dozen, out of the tens of thousands of cakes of "Ivory" soap left behind for distribution. They could not be bought or borrowed under any circumstances. Yet when the officers dined at Russian or Roumanian barracks, or the houses of the rich, they washed with Ivory soap. When the British Red Cross left, they turned over a large quantity of good toilet soaps, many of them medicated, to officials of the Roumanian Red Cross, who immediately sold them for 5 or 6 francs the cake, ostensibly because too good to give to the poor—though no kind of soap could be had for less.

Tailor shops in Jassi were overwhelmed with Russian officers wishing overcoats made out of American blankets.

Red Cross pajamas and all sorts of supplies were for sale in the open market—the richer women bought them and had them made over into clothing of various kinds. Several wagon-loads of these supplies showed up only a few days ago in Bucarest! There will be no such promiscuous stealing as this from the present Commission, but there is no way under heaven to prevent thefts amounting to thousands of francs. The only safe way to ship automobiles is with a guard; which is not very practicable, because it often takes a freight car a week to travel a hundred miles, when it is supposed to be rushed. The next best thing is to remove everything removable, and fasten all the tires on with padlocks and chains. Spark-plugs, floor-boards, even magnetos are likely to be removed; we had a big square of leather cut from the upholstery of one automobile. Of 239 cases, containing 120 pairs each of American shoes, three cases came completely empty. The total number of good American shoes stolen, if they are put on the market in Roumania, will probably bring 25,000 francs or more. Two Roumanian army chauffeurs who work for the Red Cross insisted on helping me change a spark-plug—and within five minutes one or the other had stolen a pair of side-cutting pliers out of the tool case.

The general trouble is that Roumania is a feudal aristocracy, decades behind Western Europe, and not in the same path of development at all as America. All the nasty things we used to say about French civilization before the war are true here, raised to the *n<sup>th</sup>* power. In feudal aristocracies generally, I believe, the common man has no rights, and the ruling classes no integrity. Yet there are still possibilities from the working and peasant classes. If Roumania could get a decent government and a quasi-modern industrial system, she might yet develop a democracy. The figure of illiteracy usually given, 60 per cent, is much too high. The older age-classes, almost entirely illiterate, have been decimated during the war and epidemics. Ten years from now, there should be comparatively few illiterates in the country. Those in the saddle rave about "Bolshevism," as though



only the dregs of the population were against them. As a matter of fact, it is the producing classes of the country who are most restive. They want a chance to work for living wages, a necessary part of which scheme is, of course, the power to buy the necessities of life at prices they can stand, without the addition of several hundred per cent of graft, with the connivance of the small class which has gotten control of the country, who are living like princes and waxing rich while the workers starve. Stealing is no essential part of these poor people's idea of justice, but only a substitute for it when justice is unobtainable.

The banking system of the country is a tool of the government, and almost a close-corporation for looting the nation at large. The Banca Nationala is theoretically a state bank. In practice, it is a private institution, doing the state business for the private profit of the members of the government and their friends. Its stockholders are the members of the so-called "Liberal" party. All government loans are emitted through this institution.

Next down in the hierarchy is the Banca Romanesca, a private institution. Until recently, it was supposed to be directed by a man named Stefanescu. It is now known that it is really run by Vintili Bratiano, brother of the Prime Minister. The chain of banks runs on down, the larger holding stock in the smaller institutions, much like some of our American syndicates. If a deal is too shady for the big one, it is passed on down to one of suitable size, so that the same men get the profits without any open scandal rubbing off on their skirts. These institutions are given all sorts of privileges, amounting to commercial monopolies in a country where an inadequate amount of transport facilities is all in the control of the government. American and British firms could be easily induced to bring in the medical and other supplies so direly needed at this time, at reasonable profits. But in that case, the "Ring" could not get the amazing profits they now enjoy, so the permissions cannot be secured.

I will end this digest of the situation with a few words about the new land act and the currency. At the time of

the Battle of Marasesti in 1917, the army officials made some more or less definite promises about free land to soldiers after the war. Subsequently, the government issued from Jassi, the temporary capital, a sort of manifesto, promising a fairer distribution of the land. The previous history of the old distribution would be too long even to summarize here. It is a long series of peasant uprisings, of pure nostrums applied to a cancer. A few men hold most of the land in the country, and there are tremendous tracts of State, Crown and institutional lands. The actual tillers of the soil have practically nothing, and have been crushed down by their feudal lords for so many centuries that they do not even know what human rights mean.

In the fall of 1918, when the dynasty itself was tottering, a law was finally published, whereby something over 6,000,000 of acres of arable Crown, State and private lands were to pass to peasant proprietors by March, 1919. No single proprietor could hold more than about 500 acres in the future. The land was to be classified—put into three categories according to its value and for what it was suited. There were no decent survey maps, and the peasants could not be trifled with any longer, so it was decided to evaluate according to rent paid—the valuation being roughly fixed at twenty times the rent. The previous proprietors are to be compensated through an issue of government bonds, and the peasants are to reimburse the government during a period of ten years—perhaps more, in cases where obviously necessary. The bonds net the old proprietors 5 per cent interest until they fall due.

This is not a bad thing for some of the peasants. If they merely pay double rent for ten years, they are getting the land at half its assessed value (since they would have to pay the rent anyway) and besides have the privilege of paying it out on time. But the Act has already been the bone of some of the bitterest contentions. It will yet be fought to a finish by the old proprietors before it is finally consummated. Some of their arguments

are palpably specious and others have more than a germ of truth in them.

One of their sound contentions is that the rents are based on the pre-war rate of exchange for Roumanian money (1 lei = 1 franc, French). But since the Germans issued millions on the basis of gold deposited in Berlin, which already served as the basis for the old currency, and since the Russians confiscated the treasure in Moscow, nobody knows what the actual gold value of the large present supply of money is. It depends on the indemnity collected from the Germans, and upon the general economic resurrection of the country. Only a few weeks ago, the French franc exchanged for only 1.90 to 2 lei. Then it suddenly jumped to 2.10 and 2.20. Now that trains are running to Paris, merchants are very anxious to bring in goods on which there is a very rich profit. Thus they bid up French currency, and other currency which exchanges at fixed prices in Paris, to take with them to buy goods. Other factors may also have been at work to push the exchange down to 2.40 and 2.50 lei per franc. When we arrived a month ago, an American dollar would exchange for a little better than 11 lei—today I exchanged at the rate of 14. The chief industries, like petroleum, which might export abroad and create credits, are tied up for lack of machinery, export facilities such as cars, engines and ships, and clothing and food for the workers. Only about a fourth of a winter wheat crop was sown because of the lack of draft animals, of seed, and because of the uncertainty created by the new land act. The one-fourth will feed the country, but the three-fourths represents the grain normally exported.

Hence, any present valuation of the land in Roumanian money amounts to a little over a third of its value in normal times. So the proprietors of the land are to be reimbursed in "land bonds" by the government at once, at about two-fifths the gold value of the land before the war. With the increasing value of the money, the peasants may be able to threaten the government into reducing the payments, but this will not help the original holders any;

and there will be so many of these bonds in the country as to render negotiating them at anything like face value out of the question.

Many proprietors claim that there are not peasant buyers for all their land, and that the tracts taken away from them will not be used for some time. Moreover, they claim that the supply of available labor will be entirely dissipated by giving the peasants lands of their own, so that the large holders will not be able to plant even the small fraction remaining. There is the usual argument that the peasants are shiftless and lazy, and the much sounder one that the absolutely necessary animals and machinery can only be brought in with financial credits which would be well-nigh impossible to handle in small dribblets.

Meanwhile, the peasants have their own grievances and complaints. It is obvious to them that there is an insufficiency of seed, of food and clothing, of animals and machinery. The government sent many horses out into the country districts during the winter to be cared for, since they would have starved in the cities (to see dead horses, mere heaps of bones through lack of nourishment, on the streets of the city of Bucarest is an everyday occurrence). The peasants supposed they were to be allowed the use of these army horses for the spring planting. Whether because of the threatening military situation, I do not know, but the government has recently ordered the return of all these horses by the peasants to the army. There is much muttering of the industrial populations of the town. Officials must grant exorbitant wage demands and wink at all sorts of thefts. The price of unloading cargoes from ships before the war was four or five lei per ton. At Galatz the workers recently went on strike for *eighty*.

The present government is the victim of the hopeless economic conditions as well as of its own corruption and inefficiency. With prices and conditions as they are, the present incumbents would have no hope of reelection. Marghiloman, the Anti-Russian who forboded all the

disasters of the war, was minister during the German occupation. A temporary government under General Coanda succeeded him, giving way in turn to the present "Liberal" party government. A new election was to have taken place in January, under the new universal suffrage act for old Roumania and Bessarabia. This was put off by the government until March, now until May, and will doubtless then be postponed at least until July, when the new harvest will make the situation more tolerable and the present government will have some chance of re-election. The question is, will the lid stay down that long? With wars and rumors of war, with an uncertain international situation, and the perennial possibility that the settlement will not be all that might be desired, will not some one of a dozen likely events set off the fireworks?

One well-known American traveler already rather facetiously remarked that our present American Red Cross expedition was to bolster up a rotten government and prevent a much-needed revolution. There is always the likelihood that a disturbance will be started on such a large scale that the government will disappear like a soap bubble—something like Charles the Tenth's Government of 1830, which died, to quote the old pun "of no complaint at all—everybody satisfied." Certain it is that many government people who are supporting us are doing so only because it strengthens their own hands—and will do so only in proportion as it does strengthen their hands. They wish us to place our relief stations in the politically rather than economically critical spots.

As a strenuous democrat (no party affiliation is intended), I personally object to in any way impeding the final disappearance of the feudal baron in whatever form. Yet I recognize that some people are to be helped, in spite of the general economic situation, and the condition of the working classes which makes destitution faster than any human agency can relieve it. This is Roumania today. Every cargo of supplies which comes into the country does relieve the situation somewhat—even what is stolen takes buyers out of the market and thus reduces prices

by reducing demand. With a grand total of about 3000 tons of supplies, we must first feed probably a hundred mouths (counting our total personnel, American and otherwise) for several months, and we shall buy much scarce merchandise in the local markets. Yet with the remainder we shall do some good. Not much, perhaps, compared with a Food Commission which can bring in 24,000 tons in a single day, but some.

The most hopeful thing I have yet seen as concerns our work is the campaign for second-hand clothing, now in progress in America, to be gathered by the Red Cross and transported by the Food Commission. This will be a truly great thing, if a few thousands of tons can be brought in. If you could only see the barefooted people in the city and in the country this raw March day, with nothing but tatters to protect them from the wet wind, you would understand what I mean.

Has this disjointed tale a moral? We Americans and Rudyard Kipling differ from Voltaire and Anatole France in supposing that there must always be a moral. If such indeed there be, it must be this: European civilization looks more like ours on the surface than it does under the shell.